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Louise Amoore^a

^a University of Newcastle

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Risk, reward and discipline at work

Louise Amoore

Abstract

This paper argues that the manufacture of specific kinds of uncertainty and risk has become central to programmes of work flexibilization. The construction of a risk-uncertainty relation has underpinned a raft of managerial doctrines on the worker as entrepreneur. I outline the dominant representation of risk as an unavoidable symptom of globalization. I then explore the relationship between human capital risk management, as defined by management consultants, and the working practices restructured in their name. In contrast to the rhetoric of worker-entrepreneurs, the making of contingency and uncertainty at work is revealed to be riven by tensions. I conclude by considering how we might begin to expose the myths of individual entrepreneurship, revealing the ordinary and everyday practices that make the displacement and reallocation of risk possible.

Keywords: Risk, uncertainty, work, management consultants, worker-entrepreneur.

In today's economy you have to embrace risk in order to master it and thrive.
(Andersen Consulting 2002)

At the time of Andersen's involvement in the Enron audit, the market offerings pages of its website warned of the perils of failing to 'embrace risk' and offered expertise in the mastering of this art. Though these pages were swiftly edited, and ultimately removed, they represent but one exposed element of a more widespread use of risk discourses. Andersen's retrospectively ironic statement provokes a number of questions that I consider to have a more enduring resonance. What is in the essence of today's economy that it should demand that we embrace risk? What is the nature of the 'risk' that we should embrace? Given that we will be rewarded for embracing risk, what will happen to those who do not? Presumably they will fail to 'thrive'?

Dr Louise Amoore, Department of Politics, University of Newcastle, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 7RU, UK. E-mail: louise.amoore@ncl.ac.uk

Andersen's statement represents risk as an actual concrete external threat to which people are compelled to respond if they are to reap rewards. It simultaneously conceals the disciplinary power that it is itself exercising by naming and framing risk in this way. As a number of sociologists, geographers, and cultural theorists remind us, risk cannot be isolated as a tangible event or force – if it could be it would lose its air of 'riskiness'. Instead, risk is a construction, a 'manufactured uncertainty', a 'way in which we govern and are governed' (Adam and van Loon 2000: 2; O'Malley 2000: 458). Engaging with this interdisciplinary 'risk studies' debate, I shall argue that risk should be explored in terms of what is done in its name, and through the discourses of risk that concretely shape the restructuring of social practices.

The manufacture of specific kinds of uncertainty is central to neo-liberal programmes of the restructuring of labour and working practices. International economic institutions warn of the foreign direct investment (FDI) risks that governments face if they fail to deregulate labour markets¹; governments themselves urge firms and workers to accept the new realities of an uncertain production and working context (see Blair 2000); management consultants offer firms their services for 'enterprise-wide risk management' (Andersen Consulting, 2002); and workers' everyday lives become characterized by 'diversity, unclarity and insecurity' (Beck 2000a: 1). This article will argue that the discursive linking of risk and globalisation/uncertainty has become central to programmes of work flexibilization, casualization, and fragmentation. Indeed, the construction of a specific risk-uncertainty relation has underpinned a raft of managerial doctrines on the worker as entrepreneur. If we are to challenge these programmes and reveal their inequalities and fragilities, it is necessary for us to understand how they are coming to govern people's lives. In the first section of the article I will outline the dominant contemporary representation of risk as an unavoidable symptom of globalization. This represents the uncertainties of globalization as potentially exhilarating and innovative forces that can be successfully harnessed by brave and responsible risk-taking entrepreneurs. In the workplace this message talks up the volatility and unpredictability of global markets and directly connects the survival of the firm to the innovation and adaptability (and ultimately also the survival and prospects) of individual workers.

The disciplinary functions of risk at work can best be seen through concrete and everyday working practices, for it is here that manufactured uncertainties are perceived, contested, redefined and experienced. The second section of the paper will explore the relationship between human capital risk management, as defined by management consultants, and the working practices restructured in their name. In contrast to the rhetoric of worker-entrepreneurs and individualized flexible labour, the making of contingency and uncertainty at work is revealed to be contradictory. As flexibilization programmes seek to ride out uncertainty, they simultaneously produce new insecurities and uncertainties, and rigidly constrain the choices that they claim to open up. The article concludes by reflecting on how the growing interdisciplinary 'risk studies' debate might expose the myths of

individual entrepreneurship, revealing the ordinary and everyday practices that make the displacement and reallocation of risk possible.

Harnessing globalization – embracing uncertainty

Richard Ashley has noted that the word globalization functions as both verb ('future-claiming action') and noun ('present ground in itself'), so that there is a sense in which it suggests 'not now, not yet' (2000: 2). The concept of globalization seductively claims both to describe some not-quite-present state and to offer a sketch map of a possible future terrain. The specific kind of uncertainty represented by globalization is thus thoroughly ambiguous. On the one hand, it alluringly suggests an open space of possibilities, a freedom of movement and thought in which human agents can roam and shape their world. On the other, it closes down political and social space because it names its own condition and renders alternative interpretations as 'anti-globalization', nostalgia for the past, or taboo. Employing similar terms, yet engaging in a different set of debates, the essence of a risk society is described as a 'peculiar reality status of "no-longer-but-not-yet" – no longer trust/security, not yet destruction/disaster' (Beck 2000b: 213). The significance of risk, then, is not that it *is* happening, but that it *might be* happening' (Adam and Van Loon 2000: 2), so that it appears to both acknowledge the contingency and unpredictability of human life, while also disciplining particular responses to this contingency.

It is this discursive connection between a globalization that is always 'becoming' and never quite reaches its proposed destination and perceptions of the intensification of risk that is so decisively framing the contemporary restructuring of work. If globalization is represented as an uncertain set of scenarios for which contingency arrangements are required, the politics of restructured working practices are obscured by claims to economic imperative.² The volatility of global markets, uncertain order books, the shifting positions of competitors: all are claimed as externalities exerting pressure on work and labour. In his study of the human consequences of new management cultures, Richard Sennett cites an executive for AT&T: 'We have to promote the whole concept of the workforce being contingent. . . . "Jobs" are being replaced by "projects" and "fields of work"' (1998: 22). It becomes possible to discipline individual workers into thinking in terms of harnessing the uncertainties of working in a global market in order to reduce their individual risks and maximize their personal rewards. In this way, programmes of work flexibilization have appropriated notions of uncertainty and contingency, so that 'contingent'³ labour becomes a means of risk management that preserves the entrepreneurial energy of uncertainty.

However, the emergent reframing of risk as opportunity is not confined to business and management consulting circles. Across a network of public and private authorities, intensified risks are represented as the unavoidable

outcomes of globalization. The World Bank's 2001 *Development Report* 'Attacking poverty' includes chapters on 'helping poor people manage risk' and 'harnessing global forces for poor people' (2001: 135, 179). The sources of present-day risk are located in processes of globalization: 'Living with risk is part of life for poor people, and today's changes in trade technology, and climate may well be increasing the riskiness of everyday life'. (World Bank, 2001: 135). Risks are understood to be objective, naturally occurring phenomena whose origins lie 'outside countries' borders' in 'global trade, capital flows, development assistance, technological advance, diseases and conflicts' (ibid.: 179). The Bank classifies the sources of risk as 'natural', 'social', 'economic', 'political', and so on. Risks perceived to affect labour are defined as labour market risks and classified as 'economic' in origin. These include unemployment, precarious employment, lay-offs, fluctuations in demand for labour, and the effects of migration and child labour (ibid.: 136-41).

By representing risk in this way, as an exogenous feature of globalization, the Bank is able to advocate policy responses that 'harness' global forces for growth and prosperity.⁴ The report does not suggest that risk can be managed in the sense of calculation or strategic planning, but favours instead the riding out of market forces by individuals and private households. Where a public role is envisaged, this is limited to the provision of deregulated and efficient labour markets, and workfare programs that 'self-target' by paying wages below market rates (p.155): 'To ensure that most participants are poor and to maintain incentives for workers to move on to regular work when it becomes available, programs should pay no more than the average wage for unskilled labor' (World Bank 2001: 156). A certain level of perceived uncertainty, the report suggests, is necessary to the smooth functioning of markets for labour. In the absence of uncertainty, or if risks were calculable, it is assumed that there would be no motivation for workers to innovate and to take responsibility for themselves and their household (see Aharoni 1981). The Bank's report closely allies the harnessing of uncertain global forces to individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism.

To draw upon a further example, the UK government's position on the restructuring of work and labour rests upon a similar discursive relationship between globalization and risk:

Change is opening up new horizons; but there is fear of what may lie within them. Technology and global financial markets are transforming our economies, our workplaces, our industrial structure. Economic change is uprooting communities and families from established patterns of life. The way we live, as well as the way we work, our culture, our shared morality, everything is under pressure from the intensity and pace of change. What's more, there's much of the change we like as well as worry about. It can be exhilarating. But it is certainly unsettling.

(Blair 2001: 1)

Representing a further strand of the inter-weaving of risk and globalisation as uncertainty, this speech is both *certain* about the uprooting from past practices, and *uncertain* about the future. Perceptions of exhilarating opportunity are positioned alongside unsettling feelings of fear and uncertainty. There are no claims made to be able to calculate, manage or reduce the risks of change, instead uncertainty is offered as an enticing opportunity. Societies that are 'open and flexible' and that are willing to adapt 'will prosper' (ibid.: 2). Meanwhile, 'those that move too slowly' or that 'react negatively to change' will 'fall behind' (ibid.: 2). In this representation it is held that the burden of risk is greatest for those who fail to adapt or to embrace uncertainty. In a sense, risk can be managed precisely by learning to love uncertainty and change. By representing risk in this way the Government legitimates its labour market interventions in terms of the flexibility they provide during times of uncertainty:

Welfare systems and labour markets will require fundamental reform. In Britain, this has taken the shape of major changes in: unemployment benefit; disability; the treatment of single parents and pensions. We have been careful to preserve flexibility in our labour markets and reshape the Employment Service around an active strategy for work.

(Blair 2000: 6)

Drawing on a lexicon that is familiar from the World Bank report, the restructuring of labour markets for flexibility becomes the prudent policy in uncertain times. The emphasis of risk-bearing is upon the individual faced with personal 'choices' within a deregulated labour market. The uncertainty of globalization is used to offer the possibility of rewards, while simultaneously disciplining individuals through the threats of what might be if they fail to flexibilize. As Beck has put it, it is the construction of threat in public discourse 'which stirs up fears, intimidates people, and perhaps ultimately compels political and trade union players to stave off the worst by themselves undertaking what investors want to see done' (2000c: 122). The embracing of uncertainty thus achieves a public 'common sense' logic that is somewhat insulated from political questioning and contestation.

In concrete terms the distinction between public and private realms of risk construction and risk-bearing simply cannot be drawn. The corporate and managerial mantra that we should 'embrace risk' is tightly interwoven with the governmental web I have begun to outline (see, for example, Osborne and Gaebler 1992). The 'Big Five' management consultancies⁵ all construct some variant of what Andersen Consulting refer to as 'embracing change to be a force for change', in a world where there is 'no reward without risk' (Andersen Consulting 2002). Uncertainty becomes a new creative way of thinking beyond past practices, associated with innovation, entrepreneurialism and individual talents. Cap Gemini Ernst and Young (CGEY), for example, have produced a paper on 'Thriving in an uncertain economy', that urges clients to 'adapt attitudes' and consider unpredictability as a 'force for good' (2001: 2). In this vision, a firm that takes advantage of unpredictability will, for example, use

'employee self-service techniques' to reduce slack in working practices (ibid.: 4). Current thinking in business and management literature has it that old-style risk management strategies are profoundly unsexy and passé. McKinsey & Company claim that globalization erodes the ability to plan corporate strategy: 'At the heart of the traditional approach to strategy lies the assumption that executives, by applying a set of powerful analytic tools, can predict the future. . . . When the future is truly uncertain, this approach is at best marginally helpful and at worst downright dangerous' (2001: 5).

With the business strategists proclaiming the death of strategic thinking, the claim that expert consultancy can calculate and reduce risk gives way to the celebration of uncertainty. Indeed, in the wake of the Enron debacle there is some evidence that the accounting and consulting operations of the multinational houses are being de-merged and given new identities. PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting, for example, was re-named 'Monday' in June 2002 and, in the process, was given a slogan that denoted a fresh start from the problems of the accounting houses: 'Sharpen your pencil, iron your crisp white shirts, set the alarm clock, relish the challenge, listen, be fulfilled, make an impact, take a risk' (www.Monday.com).⁶

I am not suggesting that risk management, in the sense of accounting, audit and calculation, has disappeared from the neo-liberal lexicon, but that this has become a complex blend of entrepreneurialism, where 'fortune favours the brave' (Andersen Consulting 2002), and prudent and responsible self-management. Pat O'Malley perceptively captures this as the emergence of the 'enterprising-prudent self' (2000: 466). Extreme formulations, such as Swedish business gurus Ridderstråle and Nordström's *Funky Business*, position risk-taking entrepreneurs at the heart of a new 'deregulated life' (2000: 69). They welcome their clients to 'the age of accidents . . . the age of constant alarm bells where surprise is all and no-one can predict what will happen tomorrow' (ibid.: 10). The talking up of uncertainty and surprise that is evident in many neo-liberal representations of globalization is exemplified in an acute form here. The business gurus call for companies to become 'breeding grounds of risk takers' (p. 194), and for individuals to trade on their wits, desires, emotions and feelings:

Are you ready to take care of your own life, career and capabilities? Let's face it, in a knockdown Welfare State we have to build our own support systems, map out our own futures. That is a lot of balls to juggle in the air at the same time. Making it work is the ultimate circus act.

(Ridderstråle and Nordström 2000: 218)

In each of the foregoing examples of the contemporary construction of risk, uncertainty has come to play an important role, functioning as a realm of exciting opportunities to replace the risk-averse attitudes of the welfare state. The inter-relationship between risk and uncertainty in neo-liberal programmes, if not unique, does have more in common with claims to entrepreneurial innovation than with claims to calculate potential risks strategically. To use a metaphor, in contrast to the taming of a wild horse (risk management), these

representations claim that individuals should learn to ride the wild horse and ride off into the global sunset (embracing uncertainty). In this way, what are perceived to be the best features of the wild horse – spirit, energy, innovation, creativity, and adrenaline – are harnessed for profit and growth. As in discussions of the contemporary penchant for extreme sports (see Simon 2002), it is not the environment that is regulated, disciplined and controlled, but the individual dealing with the hazardous environment.

So, what can the risk literature tell us about this apparent reconfiguration of risk and uncertainty in neo-liberal programmes of restructuring? As Sanjay Reddy (1996) has argued, drawing on Frank Knight's classic text, uncertainty and unpredictability are historically central to economic life. Reddy's reading of Knight holds that 'calculative and rationalist' or 'risk' conceptions of uncertainty have dominated over 'humane conceptions of indeterminacy' in social life (1996: 224). The argument is that Knight's original delineation between risk and uncertainty can be usefully reinvigorated to challenge the scientific 'expert' claims to make the future knowable and amenable to management. Certainly Knight's claim that 'in an absolutely unchanging social life there would be no uncertainty whatever' (1921: 264), and his suggestion that 'a life with uncertainty eliminated or perhaps even greatly reduced would not appeal to us' (ibid.: 348), offers a challenge to those who claim to measure or reduce risk. In this way perhaps, as Reddy suggests, a reclaiming of uncertainty over risk could be said to open up the potential of human agency and the possibilities of political contestation.

However, Knight's distinction between risk and uncertainty can be read differently, as suggested by O'Malley (2000). For O'Malley the 'new managerial and enterprise culture discourses have, in significant ways, challenged the "mathematical" models of economics and the "planned economies" of the welfare era' (2000: 463; see also 1996). In the light of this insight, Knight's opposition of 'measurable' risk and 'unmeasurable' uncertainty (1921: 18) can be seen as a blueprint for the appropriation and depoliticization of uncertainty in entrepreneurial discourses. For Knight, uncertainty is the essence of entrepreneurial activity, there has to be an element of unpredictability in order for profits to be made. The entrepreneur or 'adventurer' makes a judgement about the possible outcomes within a context where 'all instances of economic uncertainty are cases of choice between a smaller reward more confidently and a larger one less confidently anticipated' (1921: 237). Here it is the individual entrepreneur who exercises self-discipline and judgement and makes choices, while the environment remains uncertain yet full of promise. Moreover, Knight discusses the predisposition that particular individuals have to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability (1921: 239). The characteristics of the brave but prudent entrepreneur are associated with the acceptance of uncertainty and the adoption of an adventurous spirit, reminiscent of Charlotte Hooper's 'frontier masculinities' of *The Economist's* globalization rhetoric (2001: 160).

The reclaiming of uncertainty is not in itself, then, sufficient to repoliticize and contest the framing of risk in the restructuring of work. As O'Malley has it, uncertainty is not simply 'vagueness', but is a 'specific and enduring way of

governing the self, economic activity and social relations' (2000: 461). Read in conjunction with Nigel Thrift's work, governing through uncertainty is central to the new performative economy. A new economy does not naturally emerge as a phase of capitalism, but rather is brought into being, in large part through the making of new subjectivities. For Thrift, the 'cultural circuit of capital' requires identities that are passionate, adaptable, playful, participative, and creative (2001a: 418), and the production of managerial and worker bodies that are 'constantly attentive, constantly attuned to the vagaries of the event' (2001b: 378). In a situation where workers are labelled 'contingent' precisely to indicate their position within an uncertain production process, and where workers are exhorted to embrace uncertainty as a romantic and exciting prospect for self-fulfilment, it cannot be sufficient to reinvigorate notions of contingency and uncertainty. In many ways the distinction between risk and uncertainty is unsustainable in an era when both are continually redefined and redeployed to discipline social thought and action (see Dean 1999). Yet Reddy's desire to open up some space for political contestation and unpredictability should not be lost amid the neo-liberal appropriation of uncertainty. By contrast with claims that we can decisively characterise the present condition as the 'end of work' (Rifkin 2000) or a 'brave new world of work' (Beck 2000a), I suggest that contingency and uncertainty have multiple and contradictory meanings for workers in their everyday lives. An exploration of uncertainty as it is experienced, reproduced, contested or transformed in working practices serves to reveal some of the tensions and contradictions of the prescriptions for embracing uncertainty.

Risk and reward in the restructuring of work

The construction of uncertainties as a means to legitimate managerial interventions in the workplace, as I have argued above, has become a central feature of contemporary restructuring. Many of the business 'gurus' present the restructuring of work and labour as an imperative response to the exogenous forces of global transformation (see Peters 1988, 1994; Handy 1994; Drucker 1995). The risks of globalisation are treated as unquestionable realities that demand a flexible and contingent workforce. In order to challenge this formulation, in this section I shall explore three restructuring programmes advocated by management consultants – downsizing and contingency, total quality management (TQM), and outsourcing – each of which is legitimated through particular constructions of globalization/uncertainty and risk (see Table 1). These programmes will then be traced through the concrete experiences of workers whose everyday practices are restructured in the name of 'embracing uncertainty'. The everyday experiencing, redefining, and contesting of risk at work confounds simplistic and linear relationships between globalisation/uncertainty and restructured working practices. The management consultants adopt what Dean refers to as a 'totalizing approach to risk' (1999: 182), while a focus on the

Table 1 The (re)construction of risk and uncertainty at work

<i>Consultants' restructuring programmes for 'embracing uncertainty'</i>	<i>Workers' perceptions and experiences of uncertainty</i>
• <i>Restructuring employment</i>: downsizing and contingent labour within a 'lean' and 'flexible' firm – uncertainty demands 'organizational fitness' • <i>Restructuring working practices</i>: total quality management and the worker-entrepreneur – uncertainty demands flexible working practices, a 'customer' orientation, and restructured industrial relations • <i>Restructuring the boundaries of the firm</i>: outsourcing and restructured supply chain relationships – risks can be spread and shared with suppliers	• Uncertain hours and pay; cycle of lay-offs; blurring of work and non-work • Individualization and self-monitoring; fractured collective identities; fear of the 'other'; intensification of work and surveillance of practices • Insecure employment; proliferation of agencies and short contracts; exploitative and unprotected employment in a global supply chain; blurring of public and private work

specific mediation and experience of uncertainty in the workplace reveals the multiplicity of forms of risk and the contested nature of risk at work.

Restructuring employment: downsizing and contingency

For over a decade management commentators have declared that 'lean' and 'fit' corporations have a competitive advantage (see Atkinson and Meager 1986; Womack *et al.*, 1990; Oliver and Wilkinson 1988). In an uncertain and unpredictable global economy, they argue, it is essential that firms lose the slack that may weigh them down and dull their responses to changes in volatile markets. The holding of inventory or reserves, whether this be in labour or components and materials, is in itself positioned as a risk that can be mitigated and dispersed. As Womack and Jones have it, 'lean thinking is lean because it provides a way to do more and more with less and less – less human effort, less equipment, less time, and less space' (1996: 15). While the concept of leanness has been applied in a fairly ubiquitous fashion by the management literature, it takes on a particular form in relation to what the consultants term 'human capital'. The argument is that an optimally lean and flexible firm will employ a minimal core of workers on so-called standard contracts, and these will generally be skilled workers who have received investment in training and so on. The firm will supplement this core with a buffer of 'flexible' agency or temporary workers who will have only an indirect relationship with the firm itself. Their contract is commonly with an employment agency, or they may be self-employed and working on a freelance basis. The relationship between a firm and its workers becomes one based on multiple contracts with recruitment agencies and individuals. In effect, the firm seeks to ride out the uncertainty of global

markets via the restructuring of the employment relation. Contingent labour represents a reserve that can be hired or 'downsized' in line with fluctuations in orders. As Naomi Klein has it, 'a fluid reserve of part-timers, temps and free-lancers' enables the corporation to 'ride the twists and turns in the market' (2000: 231). A flexible workforce thus becomes the means by which companies ride out and embrace uncertainty.

The protection afforded by secure relations of employment is presented as having a stifling effect on the firm's ability to compete and, in effect, workers are rallied around the embracing of uncertainties that are displaced by corporations. Of course, in itself there is nothing historically unprecedented in the cutting of a workforce and the use of contract labour (Pollert 1981). Yet the particular alignment of a lexicon of uncertainty with the need for contingent labour is distinctive to contemporary restructuring programmes. Consulting firms are articulating the management of human capital as an issue of risk management. CGEY, for example, urge companies to 'adapt quickly to changing circumstances' and 'slim down fast' (2001: 1). The heart of this, they argue, is to adopt 'new thinking on how people work and the nature of employment' (ibid.: 1). It is this attempt to restructure the *nature* of employment that is an intrinsic feature of governing contemporary working lives. The corporate managerial vision celebrates the freedom that individuals enjoy when they cut themselves loose from the bonds of past employment practices. It envisages the 'entrepreneurizing of every job' (Peters 1994: 67), so that we come to 'look upon our work-life as a series of gigs or projects rather than a career' (Ridderstråle and Nordström 2000: 211). Consultancy guru Charles Handy (1995) commends what he calls the 'portfolio people' whose working lives are mobile and portable, rather than fixed and attached to a corporation. Overall, the message is that the risks of adopting contingent employment relationships in order to embrace uncertainty carry potential rewards for the individual worker-entrepreneur.

When viewed from the angle of the everyday practices of workers, the flexible firm with its downsized and lean supply of labour takes on a quite different complexion. While the management consultancies' programmes firmly position uncertainty in the domain of 'external' global markets, necessitating 'internal' numerical flexibility,⁷ for workers the uncertainties are located within the programme of restructuring itself. An example drawn from an electronics MNC operating in the UK illustrates the reproduction of uncertainty within the very practices advocated by a consulting team. A just-in-time (JIT) production system had been implemented with the aim of reducing materials inventory and directly linking the customer's order to the production process. An electronic data system tracked orders through production and provided bi-weekly estimates of labour requirements. Forty per cent of the total workforce was employed though an employment agency operating on site, with some workers on seven-day contracts and experiencing repeated cycles of lay-off and re-recruitment.⁸ Put simply, the firm's uncertainty as to future orders was mitigated by displacing the feelings of uncertainty onto contingent workers.

The rhetoric of free and mobile workers who reap the rewards of a more

exciting portfolio working life systematically depoliticizes the restructuring of employment relations. The experiences and perceptions of contingency as conveyed by workers reveal the webs of power that run through the restructuring of employment. Indeed, the practices that accompany human capital risk management actually rest upon the ongoing production of uncertainty and insecurity in order that workers are disciplined into adaptive attitudes. The deployment of agency workers around a production plant offers an interesting case in point. Contingent workers not only experience continual flows in and out of employment, but also re-deployment across production functions. Consultants advise that optimum numerical flexibility can be achieved by dispersing contingent workers across functions so that labour can be cut in any phase of production. Core workers perceive the strategic placement of temporary workers as a reminder of their own contingency and replaceability. The inequality of risk-bearing is highly ambiguous here – the delineation of winners and losers is not clear (see Bradley *et al.* 2000). Indeed, it is the ambiguity of the relationship between those taking risks and those reaping the rewards that operates as a disciplinary force – the message is that, in an uncertain world, the winners could become losers, and the losers, if sufficiently enterprising, could become winners.

Restructuring working practices: total quality management

The internal working practices of firms have been the subject of a myriad of managerial interventions – JIT, continuous improvement, excellence initiatives, and so on. I focus on total quality management (TQM) practices here because they are illustrative of a broader trend towards business process re-engineering (Hammer and Champy 1993), or the treatment of the production process itself as a source of competitive advantage. In these formulations all workers are conceived as ‘consumers’ of the services of their colleagues, each being responsible for ensuring the quality of their product (which may be a service), and for monitoring the quality of other products in their ‘team’ or ‘family’ (see Collins 2000; Wilkinson *et al.* 1997). The implication is that workers ‘multi-task’ so that they are not only producers of a tangible product or service, but also responsible for conscious reflection on the quality and efficiency of their own and others’ working practices, and for prudent risk-taking and innovation in these practices.

Conceptions of quality have become powerful conduits for the binding of the survival of the corporation to the capacities and innovations of individual workers (Grint 1994, 1997). The short-term risks of designing and adopting new working practices (e.g. disruption of routine, entering unknown territory, jobs lost following productivity gains) are traded off against the perception of the long-term survival of the firm in an uncertain global marketplace. So, for example, the management guru Tom Peters uses a slide in his seminars that depicts the concept of ‘WOW’, what he sees as a step beyond strategies of TQM

towards non-strategic and innate emotional perceptions of quality. Citing Robert Persig's novel *Lila*, Peters appeals to the ability of employees to trade on their sentiments: 'Quality doesn't have to be defined, you understand it without definition' (1994: 233). The implication is that workers should increasingly be encouraged to employ their intuitive senses in their work – that they are individuals whose emotions and attitudes can be harnessed to the performance of the firm.

A range of interventions are made to encourage workers to combine prudent and responsible skills of quality monitoring with risk-taking innovation-led behaviour. In the context of quality circles and teams, for example, workers are commonly offered token rewards, such as vouchers for high street stores, in return for successful suggestions for productivity improvement. Systems of performance-related pay and the growth of worker-stockholder arrangements have similarly rewarded entrepreneurial risk-taking in the workplace and connected the success of the firm to the practices of individuals.⁹ As we see in O'Malley's discussion of individual responsibility and life insurance, the individual's personal security is linked to future performance, so that it is 'not about the taming of chance', but instead 'risk is to be given its head' (2002: 111). When viewed in TQM practices, in each instance the emphasis is on securing attitudinal change in the workforce, deterring risk 'pooling' or collective security such as trade union membership, and inculcating an individualized risk culture (Beck 2000a: 75). Andersen Consulting's model for 'realigning values, attitudes and behaviours', for example, promotes the 'action team' as a way of thinking about 'new ways of working, actions and ways of behaving' (2001: 163). Despite the inference of a 'team', the model is based on individual workers' responsibilities and capacities to innovate. Each team attends a seminar designed to promote reflection on their everyday working practices and the performance of the firm. The emphasis is on seeking out best practice 'benchmarks' among team members.

A focus on the reception and interpretation of TQM programmes in the workplace serves to problematize the management consultants' models. The introduction of techniques, designed materially to restructure production and work in line with perceived market risks, is revealed to be incomplete, non-linear and subject to re-articulation. The business schools' formulas tend to construct the image of empowered and entrepreneurial workers single-handedly taking on the uncertainties of producing for global markets. As Richard Sennett depicts it, 'the rhetoric of modern management attempts to disguise power in the new economy by making the worker believe he or she is a self-directing agent' (1997: 173). In this way, distant uncertainties such as the global financial markets are made real in the local context in terms of personal competences and aptitudes.

Yet, the restructuring of working practices takes place in collective and social contexts that give an array of concrete and conflicting meanings to uncertainty. Indeed, these contexts are precisely positioned as the target of restructuring programmes. As one human resources manager of an electronic component

MNC put it, 'one of the problems we have had here has been changing the mindsets and attitudes of workers'.¹⁰ The management guru Tom Peters raises the question 'does anyone know what it means to manage the human imagination', and warns that an answer to his question must be found if the opportunities of the new economy are to be seized (1994: 12). It is clear that the consultants' models for managing uncertainty rest upon the inculcation of a culture of risk-taking and self-government.¹¹ Thus, the transformation of working practices must be understood as more than simply a response to the material reality of an uncertain global economy; instead, it relies upon the ideational production and reproduction of ways of thinking about risk and uncertainty.

The question remains as to whether the disciplinary effects of 'embracing uncertainty' via TQM closes down the space for potential resistance or for the framing of alternative practices. On the one hand, the fragmentation and individualization brought about through TQM and associated programmes is certainly accompanied by an intensification of work and feelings of insecurity and intensive surveillance. Ericson *et al.*'s study of governmental tendencies in private insurance reveals that 'each individual is to be her own political economy, an informed, self-sufficient consumer of labour markets, personal security markets, and other consumer interests' (2000: 533). There is little doubt that working identities are being restructured along these lines. In the service and leisure sectors, for example, retail is increasingly packaged for consumers as a world of experiences. Workers in these sectors are commonly recruited on the basis of personal and emotional characteristics from vocal intonation to perceived empathy, and may be trained to perform in particular ways (see du Gay 1996; McRobbie 2002). The rise of such practices has been aligned with 'soft capitalism' (Ray and Sayer 1999; Thrift 2002) – the value of creativity, performance and style, though it has not been confined to the service sectors. In his study of 'soft capitalism', or what he terms the 'turn to life', Paul Heelas explores the discourses and practices aimed at 'enhancing commitment and motivation; identifying and unlocking barriers to success; seeking identity; working as a team or as a company; exercising responsibility or initiative; believing in one's product; and so on' (2002: 82). These themes are in evidence across a broad spectrum of manufacturing and service industries, in wider governmental attempts to shape our relationship to the welfare state and our rights and responsibilities as consumers.

In the case of the restructuring of manufacturing, the advent of soft capitalism has tended to redefine productive and working practices in terms of the provision of a complete service (to customer, manager, or fellow worker). Workers in UK-based MNCs have reported their bombardment with video presentations of 'new ways of working', electronic message boards displaying the performance (productivity) of 'rival' teams in the factory, and handbooks guiding them through the pitfalls of 'managing change'. One major UK electronics MNC displays posters that position workers 'at the heart of the quality circle' and a 'consumer' of the services of their colleagues. Another company re-

furnished the shopfloor canteen with glass screens so that workers who extended their breaks could be seen by their 'team mates' who had returned to the floor.¹² O'Shea and Madigan report similar practices implemented by US consultants, with one client firm adopting a laminated 'company values card' to be carried by all employees. Among the values advocated by the card are 'respect for the individual' and the 'encouragement of intellectual curiosity', while it also reminds workers of the centrality of 'quality, participation, efficiency, flexibility' (1997: 90). In each of these examples TQM programmes are extended into the self-management of personal qualities and the remote governance of human interaction in the workplace.

Yet, amidst the apparently total grip of such techniques, some sense of Sanjay Reddy's call to 'recover alternative and more humane conceptions of indeterminacy' can be salvaged (1996: 224). The implementation of total quality management practices is not simply received by workers, but is subject to ongoing processes of translation and contestation. Small and everyday acts of resistance in the sense intended by James Scott (1990) are evident in the interplay between managerial models and workers' perceptions and experiences. Workers required to monitor the flow of production through a '*kanban*' system, for example, used the communication cards to circulate jokes and gossip around the factory floor.¹³ A number of studies of the reception of new working practices emphasize the fragile and unpredictable nature of the managerial programmes themselves. The use of quality circles and teamworking is commonly perceived by workers as an attempt to encourage competition between them, and this is resisted tacitly and indirectly (see Rubery 1995; McCabe 1996; Danford 1998). Lean production systems are particularly vulnerable to worker action and resistance, relying as they do on immediate response and minimal inventory (Moody 1997). Others point to the shocks of TQM being absorbed by workers, leading to low morale and, ultimately low productivity (Garrahan and Stewart 1992; Milkman 1998). Indeed, management commentators themselves suggest that risk may be 'mismanaged' if the 'irredeemably political' nature of the firm is not taken into account (Grint 1997: 173). It is important, then, not to overstate the coherence of the managerial plans to 'embrace uncertainty' through restructured working practices. The programmes advocated by consultants, in order to be attractive to their corporate clients, tend to obscure the complexities and contradictions of TQM. Uncertainty is firmly and securely positioned in the external realm of global markets, denying the insecurity and uncertainty that is produced within the programme of restructuring itself.

Restructuring the boundaries of the firm: outsourcing

The unprecedented growth in the outsourcing of productive and service functions in recent years has become the most explicit managerial means of 'embracing uncertainty'.¹⁴ The principle is that the risk borne by the firm in producing for uncertain and unpredictable global demand can be distributed along a sup-

ply chain and, in effect, shared with a plethora of contracted suppliers, distributors, and providers of ancillary services. The emergent corporate discourse on outsourcing envisages the optimal competitive firm as a fractured entity with fluid and malleable boundaries (Amoore 2000). For the management consultants, described by Thrift as becoming 'an extension of firms' (2001a: 415), it has become possible to put together packages of knowledge about how to outsource successfully and achieve porous boundaries (see Elmuti and Kathwala 2000). The outsourcing trend, then, is a complex interplay of business practices and knowledge production that positions outsourcing as a solution to the problem of unpredictability.

O'Shea and Madigan's exposé of the global consulting firms suggests that consulting companies 'promise individualized versions of the bluest of skies' in promoting their business solutions (1997: 14). CGEY's 'connected economy services' provides a case in point, offering 'a first step towards making it possible not just to survive, but to thrive through uncertainty' (2001: 7). Intensified global 'connectivity', they claim, is a 'natural by-product of recent technological developments' (p. 3). The downside of connectivity is said to be the unpredictability of customer demand, while the 'blue sky' solution offered is the restructuring of supplier relationships: outsourcing. Outsourcing is, according to CGEY, 'being redefined as a critical element in achieving outstanding competitive gains', and, most significantly, offers a means of 'reducing exposure to risk from external partners' (ibid.: 4). The consultants' message is that 'it makes excellent sense to share your own risk', and that this can be achieved via expert guidance on rendering the boundaries of the enterprise more 'porous' (ibid.: 6). In effect, a central feature of corporate risk management has become the refocusing on 'core business', and the outsourcing of production and service functions into a network of subcontractors and suppliers. Firms are actively encouraged to fracture into functional fragments that are loosely connected in terms of contract and responsibility (i.e. they can be instantaneously terminated), but tightly tied in terms of control of the production process or product.

The use of outsourcing and subcontracting has made a particular discourse of uncertainty highly visible in the management-consulting repertoire. The consultants, and other business service professionals in the 'weightless industries' (Coyle 1997: 91), represent themselves as change merchants whose body of knowledge can help firms to embrace uncertainty. Yet, the people whose working lives are transformed by the consultants' interventions remain relatively invisible in this celebration of uncertainty – and, hence, the concrete displacement of risk into homes, sweatshops, supply-chain workshops, and other *ad hoc* and unprotected sites is obscured. Subcontractors are commonly firms that establish themselves in a relationship with a large MNC with the precise aim of taking up the slack that is diffused in a lean production system. These firms, usually small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), but also large agents producing for multiple brands,¹⁵ can be understood as absorbing the risks displaced by the client firm. As one production worker for an automotive component supplier commented, 'in a lean production system, someone

somewhere has to take up the slack. It is usually the weakest link in the chain'.¹⁶ Beneath the surface of the consultants' outsourcing strategies are the intermediary traders who will subcontract on to plants using temporary and unprotected labour (EIRO 2000; Klein 2000). In practice, this could be assembly work contracted to an export processing zone, or to homeworkers in the UK. As Lui and Chiu (1999) have documented in their ethnography of textile production in Hong Kong and Taiwan, uncertainty is reproduced as it is moved along a supply chain, so that, ultimately, risks are experienced in the form of threats to well-being, life and livelihood: 'Larger firms spread their risks of production by subcontracting. Subcontractors, in turn, pass on the risk by contracting out to homeworkers. The latter are not considered as employees and thus fall outside the scope of labour protection' (Lui and Chiu 1999: 171).

Tracing the concrete production of uncertainty through the outsourcing of production reveals an important, though largely neglected feature of risk in working practices: the gender inequalities. When CGEY advocate restructured and porous corporate boundaries they do not reveal the reconfiguration of public and private that is taking place within the drive to outsource. The presumed 'private' realm of home and household is also a site of production for the global economy. The International Labour Organization reports rapid increases in the number of homeworkers providing 'optimal flexibility in advanced industrialised countries and less developed countries' (ILO 2000: 114).¹⁷ The garment industry, electronics and assembly sectors, together with services such as catering and cleaning, have found their way into homes. Put simply, the firm that 'thrives on uncertainty' may do so on the back of the acute uncertainties of low-paid and unprotected piecework undertaken predominantly by women and children. It is with considerable irony that the consulting firms play important roles in both the advocacy of outsourcing and the monitoring of conditions in outsourcing plants. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), for example, offer outsourcing advice to major garment brands, while also providing services for the monitoring of labour codes in East Asian garment manufacturing plants.¹⁸

Of course, households also represent the sites in which the global revival in domestic services has taken place. We can see processes of risk displacement at work here also. If worker-entrepreneurs are to 'embrace uncertainty' in their working lives, their working time becomes less predictable, their time for domestic and care work diminishes, and their use of hotel and catering services increases. Chang and Ling refer to masculinized traits of mobility, autonomy and challenging opportunity (characteristics of the worker-entrepreneur), resting upon the 'global feminisation of labour intimacy' (2000: 34). The championing of outsourcing as a means to a lean, fit and flexible corporation is evident also at the level of individuals – so that domestic and personal services become part of the outsourcing boom. The consultants' representation of outsourcing as a means to share risk (with connotations of collaboration and risk pooling) is revealed in practice to displace and reallocate risk, with disproportionate effects on particular worker groups.

In sum, the restructuring of work, advocated as a means of risk management, cannot be understood as an automatic and rational response to the uncertainties of globalization, though this is clearly the representation favoured by the consultants. When we explore the concrete living and experiencing of uncertainty in working practices we begin to see the tensions and contradictions that are obscured by managerial models. In contrast to the naturalized uncertainties of globalization, we see uncertainties continually defined and redefined, with the production of security and reward for some groups resting upon the displacement of insecurity and uncertainty onto others.

Concluding remarks: ‘summiteers’, ‘mountaineers’, and risk in everyday life

The management of risk via the construction of a range of challenging and alluring uncertainties, I have argued, has become an important dynamic in the contemporary governing of work. It is not that this is a wholesale and fundamental watershed in global capitalism, and indeed risk and uncertainty have been used to frame entrepreneurial identities in the past (see Knight 1921). Rather, the point is to begin to reveal how re-articulations of risk and uncertainty are forming new bodies of expert knowledge as well as new perceptions of risk, reward and responsibility on the part of workers. Perhaps most visibly, the connection of risk to globalization/uncertainty has framed a series of élite managerial programmes designed to promote flexible and adaptable governments, corporations and individuals. Among its most recent manifestations, the entrepreneurial ‘riding out’ of risk has become a guiding ethos in the British Labour government’s thinking. It is reported that John Kay’s (2003) book *The Truth About Markets* is guiding current thinking in New Labour, to the extent that Kay’s advocated ‘culture of audited experimentation’ has been taken up in discussions of the future of the welfare state, pensions and immigration (Kettle 2003: 22). The essence of the argument is that in an era of globalisation governments and individuals should accept that they no longer singularly control outcomes, and that they should become greater risk-takers.

Behind the glamorous image of the risk-taker entrepreneur, however, there lies a much less visible shift in the ways in which people perceive and experience the nature of employment, their working practices, and the insecurities in their lives. In order to draw out more fully the relationship between the ‘shiny face’ of risk-taking and the concrete experiences of risk and uncertainty, I shall conclude by developing a metaphor invoked by Jonathan Simon (2002) in his study of risk discourses in extreme sports. In many ways Simon’s focus on representations of risk in mountain climbing is an archetypal example of the glamour, courage, and adventure of the individual triumphing in adversity – the essence of embracing risk. Simon identifies a duality in representations of the experience of climbing that map onto the duality I have identified in working practices. The first

discourse he identifies as 'summiteering', in which climbing is represented as a challenge to the individual, driven by a determination to reach the summit 'preferably first, fastest, or with the greatest display of fitness' (2002: 181). It is this representation, Simon argues, that has dominated the business magazines that advertise climbing adventures to wealthy corporate executives and financiers. The second he calls 'mountaineering' – a discourse present among climbers themselves who do not simply celebrate the 'summit', but emphasize the collective effort of the climb, and debate and contest the norms and principles that should 'govern risk-takers in their interactions with each other and nature' (ibid.: 182).

Simon's summiteers are closely allied to the management consultant's representations of risk I explored above. The risks involved in reaching the summit are presented as naturally occurring threats that the individual adventurer must conquer. The summit functions as a metaphor for self-help, perseverance, and personal fulfilment, so that the experience of confronting risk is 'framed as direct and unmediated by human relations' (ibid.: 190), and the contests and politics of risk production and displacement are obscured. Simon reveals summiteering to be a somewhat mythical and incomplete experience, drawing attention, for example, to the teams of Sherpas and professional climbers who absorb the risks displaced by the corporate climbers in their attempts on Everest (ibid.: 192).

The embracing of uncertainty in employment and work has similarly celebrated the 'summiteer' – the lean and adaptive firm that can harness the uncertainty of globalization, and the individual worker-entrepreneur whose combination of risk-taking and prudent self-government ensures their survival in a competitive marketplace. Meanwhile, the many 'mountaineers' – subordinate or contingent workers who absorb, further displace or contest uncertainty – remain much less visible. For Simon, it is in this more ordinary realm that the socially constructed nature of risk is acknowledged. His mountaineers, for example, debate the ethics of inserting bolts into a rock face (making it less risky to climb, but defacing it for the purists) and the problem of risks borne by the rescuers of those whose adventure goes awry. In the workers' perceptions and experiences I have explored above, the controversial and disputed nature of risk in the workplace is similarly evident. Just as Simon finds among the mountaineers some potential for collective social engagement on the risks, rewards and responsibilities of climbing, so also in the realm of work we find that the governmental programme of embracing risk is incomplete and contains potential spaces for alternatives.

The task of those who seek to interpret the new modes of risk management, then, becomes one of revealing the gaps, tensions, and contradictions of the fictional 'summiteer'. To put it in Jonathan Simon's terms, it is to acknowledge that, wherever we are presented with a brave summiteer, the legions of mountaineers are never far behind. While the actions and adventures of financial and corporate risk managers loom large in the drive to make an uncertain future 'knowable', the ordinary and everyday practices that enable risks to be displaced

and reallocated tend to be ignored. If we are to challenge and politicize managerial exhortations for workers to be risk-takers, we need to reveal how a specific representation of risk and globalization has made this logic possible and, most importantly, how they are played out in the everyday realm of working practices. The apparent risks of globalization are not simply passively received by workers into their daily practices, but are interpreted and experienced within a social context. Despite claims that globalization has incontrovertibly brought about the intensified uncertainty that is 'risk society' (Beck 1992; 1998), it is the everyday social interaction in firms, communities and families that mediates and translates perceived risks (Boden 1994; 2000; Castañeda 2000). The management consultants' recommendations for the 'embracing of risk' cannot claim to have categorically identified, defined, and dealt with uncertainty, then, for it is subject to ongoing interplay with workers, managers, unions, families, and communities. Understood in this way, the high-profile visibility of the summiteers is not separable from the invisible everyday lives of the mountaineers. The flexibilization of work and labour, ostensibly designed to reduce the firm's exposure to risks of fluctuating demand, is redefined and displaced, for example, through the lives of a machine-tool worker, her family, and her child-minder. If the embracing of risk is becoming a central means of governing in the global economy, it is made possible through the displacing of risk.

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Notes

1 The OECD, for example, celebrates the deregulated labour markets of Britain, the US, and New Zealand, and warns that Germany, Denmark, and Sweden risk high levels of unemployment and diminished competitiveness, the 'costs of inaction' (1996: 21). The World Bank similarly notes that 'Governments and workers are adjusting to a changing world. The legacy of the past can make change difficult or frightening. Yet, realization of a new world of work is fundamentally a question of sound choices' (1995: 11).

2 A number of studies use Foucault's concept of governmentality to reveal the relationship between representations of social change, and the neo-liberal interventions that are enabled by these representations (Miller and Rose 1990; Lemke 2001; Dean 1999).

3 The term 'contingent labour' is commonly used in the US to describe part-time, casualized, and flexibilized workers (Moody 1997: 5). The ever-expanding groups of contingent labour (and there are varying degrees of contingency within the groups) are

thus directly identified with a term associated with uncertainty and unforeseen circumstances.

4 The use of uncertainty to discipline particular policy responses is evident also in the deputy managing director of the IMF, Stanley Fischer's, comments that 'if we manage the process well . . . globalization will continue, to the benefit of all. . . There will be surprises along the way' (Fischer 2000).

5 For the purposes of this paper I have drawn upon statements made by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Andersen Consulting, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, and McKinsey & Co. The 'Big 5' usually refers to the first three of these consulting multinationals, with the addition of KPMG and Deloitte and Touche, though mergers and splits are ongoing (see Pinault 2001).

6 In October 2002 PwC Consulting/Monday was bought by IBM Business Consulting Services, now the world's largest consulting services organization.

7 Numerical flexibility denotes the establishment of a flexible and responsive supply of labour. The human capital consultants advocate the synchronizing of the supply of labour with the immediate requirements of the corporation.

8 Confidential interview with employment agency staff and human resource managers, UK, 1998.

9 The 2002 collapse of Enron vividly illustrates the risks that are both produced and absorbed by worker-stockholders.

10 Confidential interview with human resources manager, UK, 1999.

11 A number of studies, drawing on Foucault's sense of 'government', focus on the self-government of risk. See, for example, Nikolas Rose's (2002) essay on mental health; Claudia Castañeda (2000) on child organ stealing, and Jonathan Simon (2002) on extreme sports.

12 Confidential interviews with production workers, UK, 1999 and 2000.

13 The '*kanban*' system (approximates to 'ticket' in Japanese) supports a lean production system by signalling, using small cards or markers, the requirements for components or materials at a particular stage of production. The principle is that *kanban* functions as a communication network that 'pulls' materials according to demand at the end of the production process, rather than 'pushes' from the start of the line. The specific example of workers' experiences of *kanban* is drawn from a confidential interview with production workers, UK, 2000.

14 See Outsourcing Institute (2000) for data and analysis of the growth of outsourcing practices.

15 Taiwanese-owned footwear producer Pou Chen Corp, for example, produces shoes for multiple brands, including Nike, Adidas, Timberland, Converse, Reebok, and Rockport. Itself a major multinational, Pou Chen subcontracts production on to factories in Thailand, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam. For papers on working conditions in Pou Chen production sites see <http://www.cleanclothes.org>.

16 Confidential focus group interview, South Wales, UK, 1998.

17 See also the Homenet organization for homeworkers, papers available at: <http://www.homenetww.org>.

18 My thanks to researchers at the ITGLWF and Clean Clothes Campaign for drawing my attention to this practice.

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Louise Amoore is Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Newcastle. She is the author of *Globalisation Contested* (Manchester University Press, 2002), and has published her work in *New Political Economy*, *Review of International Political Economy*, and *International Studies Perspectives*. She is co-editor of the Routledge/RIPE series in Global Political Economy. Her current research is on the role of risk discourses in the restructuring of work and employment.